

Challenging the Liberal Consensus: The Structural Conditions for Far-Right Success in Europe

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Abstract: The political landscape of Europe is undergoing a profound and turbulent transformation, marked by the unprecedented rise of far-right movements and populist parties. This surge is not an isolated political phenomenon but rather the culmination of deep-seated structural shifts within European societies. This essay argues that the ascendancy of the far right is a direct consequence of three interconnected crises: the socio-economic dislocation wrought by neoliberal globalization, the potent cultural and political anxieties surrounding immigration and identity, and a profound crisis of legitimacy afflicting the traditional political elite. Firstly, it will examine how economic globalization has exacerbated wealth inequality, eroded the welfare state, and created a dispossessed "loser" class, fostering widespread resentment. Secondly, it will analyze the role of immigration as a catalytic issue, where real socio-economic pressures are weaponized by nationalist rhetoric to threaten concepts of national identity and social cohesion. Finally, it will explore the growing chasm between the elite and the electorate, wherein established parties are perceived as prioritizing abstract universalism and economic interests over the tangible well-being of their own citizens. Together, these factors have created a perfect storm, dismantling traditional political allegiances and providing a fertile ground for far-right ideologies to flourish and reshape the European project.

Keyword: European politics; Far right; Populism

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1 The Impact of Globalization on the social and economic structure of Europe

Globalization enables the free flow of capital on a global scale, and its ultimate beneficiaries are the wealthy class around the world. The world's richest 10% of the population consume 59% of the global total and possess 85% of the world's total wealth. The consumption of the lower-class population accounts for only 7% of the global total consumption, and the wealth they possess only 1% of the total wealth. The anti-globalization sentiment stems from the lower classes with low education and income rather than the elite. As "losers" in the process of globalization, these people have long been disappointed with the liberal establishment elites. However, due to the fact that few establishment parties choose to give up their own interests and speak up for these people, the lower classes have gradually been marginalized and even demonized by the mainstream society. It was not until populist parties emerged under the slogan of "serving the people" that these people found a new channel to express themselves.

Developing countries that carried out domestic reforms and structural adjustments in accordance with neoliberal principles have not witnessed the economic prosperity and development promised by the Washington Consensus. Instead, they have experienced economic recessions, financial crises, declining incomes, and an widening gap between the rich and the poor. The outcome of practice has compelled the vast number of developing countries to reflect on the fundamental principles of neoliberalism and start to resist and criticize the neoliberal policies of the Washington Consensus, thus leading to the end of the Washington Consensus. The repeated outbreak of financial crises is the destiny of capitalism. The government has no choice but to intervene appropriately after the crisis breaks out. Rahman believes that the wealth gap caused by uneven distribution has plunged "laissez-faire capitalism" into a "legitimacy crisis". The combination of neoliberalism and globalization has led to an unprecedented deepening of the polarization between the rich and the poor on a global scale.

Since the outbreak of the financial crisis, Western capitalism has been Mired in economic downturn, high

unemployment rate and difficulties in structural economic reform. The purpose of the birth of capitalism was to protect capitalists and their assets, which automatically placed the proletariat in opposition to capitalists. In modern European society, the model of the welfare state to some extent whitewashes this direct opposition, appropriately narrowing the gap between high-income and low-income earners through a series of social welfare systems. In his book "Capital in the Twenty-First Century", French economist Thomas Piketty pointed out that the essence of capitalism is to increase the power of capital owners, while the interests of workers are bound to be harmed, which is the root cause of social inequality. In the current era when liberalism prevails, how liberal governments regulate the market and restore its operation to address the wealth gap as much as possible has become a difficult problem faced by Western countries. Former British Prime Minister David Cameron believes that today's capitalism has become "capitalism lacking conscience" due to the lack of moral markets, fair wealth distribution and competitive globalization. To improve the current situation, it is necessary to correct it through "responsible capitalism" and "ethical markets".^[1]

Major economic changes, such as economic recessions or significant economic reforms, may affect social stability and public welfare, and thereby impact social security. Economic hardship may lead to social unrest and challenge the stability of the social structure. Anti-globalization is an important ideology of the far right. The far-right ideology holds that the power of globalization will dilute local culture and disrupt the traditional social structure. The increase in cross-border information, goods, capital, and personnel flows under globalization will further challenge existing social norms and values, leading to a decline in the cultural identity and social stability of the country.^[2]

Globalization and financial capital have led countries to constantly transform their economic structures, maximize the global distribution of capital returns, and continuously erode the real economy, resulting in the disappearance of many industries or sectors and the formation of structural unemployment problems. Take France as an example. France once planned a major labor law reform and was the first to innovate employment contracts and other employment mechanisms to address unemployment issues, enhance enterprises' willingness to hire workers, and strengthen their competitiveness, which was strongly protested by society. However, this innovation soon ended in failure because the new legislation significantly reduced the opportunities for "iron rice bowls", and the on-the-job rotation rate kept rising, especially the instability of employment among young people and in some industries increased significantly. The increasing financial pressure and the decreasing social welfare have plunged the lives of many unemployed families into difficulties. For this reason, the government has no choice but to reform the pension system. The Macron government's delay in the time needed to receive pensions has not only increased citizens' dissatisfaction but also hindered the intergenerational change in the labor market and intensified the pressure on the young people's labor market. Due to the continuous deterioration of social conditions, citizens' confidence has been weakened. Citizens are calling on the government to carry out reforms, but they seem to have lost patience with the results of the changes. The social mobility that existed before the 1990s no longer exists. The rigidity of social classes, polarization and the increasing poverty are becoming the norm in many people's lives.

The rise of far-right forces in Europe is closely related to the persistently sluggish economy. The European debt crisis in 2008 was the fundamental cause of the long-term economic downturn in Europe, which prompted Europeans to support far-right political parties. However, some scholars have found that compared with the economic crisis itself, the specific labor market policies formulated by the liberal establishment are the economic reasons for the rise of the far right. Over the past three decades, many governments have relaxed their regulations on Employment protection legislation (EPL) and reduced unemployment benefits. Where unemployment benefits are generous, the unemployment rate has no connection with the rise of the far right, but where they have no connection, the unemployment rate is associated with a higher support rate for the far right. Austerity policies may strengthen support for the far right in the European Parliament and undermine the process of European integration.

The relationship between the state and society, as well as between the state and its citizens, is an important issue for the far right. The difficulties of change have exposed the predicament faced by the institutional crisis, and the call for change has become a signal of France's shift towards political extremism. The vast majority of participants in the French social movement believe that no traditional political party can represent their propositions and demands, and they refuse to cooperate with any political party. Out of distrust of traditional party politics, angry demonstrators hope that the movement

will develop in the direction of establishing a new party. When the movement demonstrated strong social mobilization, it demanded that political parties, trade unions and other political organizations should not intervene in any name. Whenever the government proposes major policy reforms, there will be large-scale public protests and strikes, and even serious riots and violent acts that disrupt social order. The excessive actions of the government have aroused strong dissatisfaction among the public, which is a manifestation of unstable factors and also a sign of the public's lack of willingness to engage in social dialogue with the government.

2 The issue of refugees and immigrants has become the core

From 1990 to 2020, the total number of immigrants in Europe is estimated to have continued to increase. In 1990, the total number of immigrants in Europe was 49.6 million. By 2020, this figure had risen to 86.7 million. This means that over the past 30 years, the total number of immigrants has increased by 37.1 million. In addition, Europe and Asia have respectively received approximately 87 million and 86 million international migrants, accounting for 61% of the global total. Following closely behind is North America, where the number of international migrants in 2020 approached 59 million, accounting for 21% of the global total. Africa accounts for 9%. Latin America and the Caribbean account for 5%. Oceania accounts for 3%.^[3]Overall, the number of international migrants has increased significantly over the past five decades. By 2020, it is estimated that 281 million people will be living in countries other than their home countries, an increase of 128 million from 1990 and more than three times the estimated number in 1970. The significant increase in the number of immigrants has led to complex social, economic, and political dynamics in the destination countries.

Immigration, as a global phenomenon, has become one of the most important topics of discussion in Europe in recent decades. Driven by economic, political, and social factors, immigration has had a significant impact on the receiving countries, influencing their social security systems and social policies.^[4]In recent years, the sharp increase in the number of immigrants in Europe has led to significant political and social changes, especially in terms of social security and national identity. The resulting tensions have contributed to the rise of far-right parties. These political parties take advantage of public concerns, positioning themselves as defenders of national identity and social order, and often use the phenomenon that immigrants pose a threat to the welfare system to gain electoral support.^[5]This rise highlights the profound impact of immigration on social policies and social security in Europe.

Although immigration can bring economic benefits, cultural diversity, and community richness, it also brings challenges such as difficulty in integration, problems of social cohesion and pressure on public services, which may lead to social division and tension. People often focus their attention on the negative impacts of immigration. Far-right parties have exploited these concerns, using nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric to depict immigration as a threat to national identity and social cohesion. This framework has resonated with voters, who believe that immigration poses a challenge to the social security system, especially during economic downswings.^[6]

The issue of immigration has become a chronic problem in the social order of European countries. Take France as an example. Immigrants are the most vulnerable group in the French economy. They have the highest unemployment rate and the lowest income. The youth unemployment rate in some areas where immigrants gather exceeds 40%, which is twice the average level in France. The unemployment rate of the descendants of African immigrants is three times that of the descendants of non-immigrants. In old industrial areas such as Amiens, the immigrant unemployment rate is 45%, and two-thirds of young people have been unemployed for a long time due to the closure of traditional industries.^[7]French immigrants have two main characteristics: First, Islamic immigrants of North African descent make up the vast majority. Second, the descendants of the two-generation immigrants born in France are more numerous than those of the first-generation immigrants. During France's "30 years of glory", immigrants were marginalized groups with very low "visibility" and received almost no attention from French society. Since the 1970s, due to economic development and structural adjustment, the ability of French society to absorb immigrants has declined. Immigrants are no longer human capital but have become an inescapable burden. The issue of immigration was initially raised mainly in the economic and social fields, such as immigrants seizing local jobs, free-riding, committing crimes and disrupting public order. The structure of high fertility rate and low employment rate among immigrants cannot provide impetus for France's sustainable

development. Since then, the issue of immigration has risen to the level of "threatening the purity and cultural identity of France". The far-right party, known for its xenophobic sentiment, has begun to exaggerate the harm of immigrants to French society in elections for votes. Immigrants mainly work in dirty and harsh industries, which have no impact on the employment of local residents. Even today, there is still a certain degree of immigrant labor that does not pose a threat to the employment of local residents at all.

The refugee crisis is an important turning point for populist parties in Europe to move towards the far right. Right-wing populist parties have been vigorously inciting "identity politics", referring to African refugees in the central and northeastern regions as "invaders", thereby attracting a large number of voters who hold a rejecting attitude towards foreign refugees and feel that their traditional identities are threatened. They regard Muslim refugees from the Middle East and North Africa as "outliers" and associate immigrants with high crime rates. ^[8]Orban called refugees rapists, potential terrorists, job predators and the "poison" of the country. ^[9]A large number of centrist voters have flocked to far-right populist parties. The combination of xenophobia and "identity politics" has pushed the political polarization of the right wing to an unprecedented height.

The refugee crisis has triggered a wave of European nationalism. Scholars from Central and Eastern Europe have classified the nationalist factors that constitute populism into two types. One is "defensive nationalism", which involves using cultural issues to mobilize conservative voters, internally excluding domestic minorities such as Russians, Romanians, and Jews, and externally resisting foreign forces such as foreign companies and the European Union, along with historical legacy issues such as border problems and transition legacies. The close combination of nationalism and the theory of the failure of transformation has given political polarization a direct target for attack. ^[10]Another type is restorative nationalism, whose strategy is to take advantage of the people's nostalgia, inspire them to defend the purity of the national culture, and advocate maintaining the purity of the national culture, which is actually the race, in order to return to the once peaceful and prosperous era. ^[11]Restorative nationalism usually comes along with changes such as modernization, immigration, and the weakening of the concept of the state. Due to changes in the external environment, the internal environment of a country has to change accordingly, and such changes will threaten the identification with the traditional nation-state. Whether it is defensive nationalism or regressive nationalism, Central and Eastern European nationalism stems from the dissatisfaction of the broad lower-class people with reality. Right-wing populists precisely take advantage of this sentiment to push it towards political polarization. It is worth noting that the existence of right-wing radical populist parties has generally increased the parties' attention to immigration issues and influenced the formulation of centralized immigration control policies by left-wing mainstream parties and the integration policies of mainstream right-wing parties towards multicultural orientations. Political polarization is a manifestation of political instability and will also trigger a series of political upheavals and crises. Internal political instability and conflicts can undermine the effectiveness of the government, create an environment of uncertainty and division, and thereby threaten social security. Political crises can undermine social cohesion and intensify existing social tensions.

3 People's dissatisfaction with the elite

Immigration policies are complex in balancing competing aspects such as human rights, social cohesion and economic growth. European political elites advocate accepting a large number of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa mainly for two reasons: First, due to their consistent liberal universal values, traditional mainstream political parties have been particularly prominent in the European refugee crisis, directly triggering people's dissatisfaction. To a large extent, the EU's refugee policy places the interests of refugees above those of its own people. As outsiders, refugees directly harm the welfare and interests of their own people, squeezing the living space of those whose interests have already been damaged under the current order. Populists take the opportunity to escalate the dissatisfaction of the people into nationalism and xenophobia. The second is to make up for the shortage of labor in Europe. Cheap foreign labor not only makes up for the labor shortage caused by the aging of European society, but also reduces labor costs. The interests of the cheap foreign labor force are in opposition to those of the middle and lower working classes in the country. The intellectual elites representing universal values and the business elites advocating economic interests thus reached an agreement, while the lower classes

were unable to find party representatives of their identities and interests within the ruling party.

Far-right populist parties are at odds with the left in terms of values, breaking the center-right tradition and advocating a welfare system guaranteed by the government. This is an implicit condition of Western democracy and what the original left-wing parties promised to their voters. The government has cut welfare spending while increasing spending on immigrants, causing a huge sense of unfairness among its own people. On the European continent, the completer and more developed the welfare system of a country is, the more intense the voices opposing immigration become. Right-wing parties with nationalist characteristics have taken advantage of this "welfare chauvinism" to soar. More than a quarter of the votes for the far-right Danish People's Party came from the working class. The Liberal Party in the Netherlands is in the same situation. Marine Le Pen positions herself as a defender of French identity, opposing the "Islamic occupation", and the target voters of her National Front are also the working class. For a long time, the far right has been blaming refugee immigrants for domestic social problems. Le Pen claimed that young people of foreign descent have caused unrest in French society, so "the most important thing is that we need to stop anarchist immigration."^[12] This statement resonated with many French people. The anti-immigrant slogans of far-right parties continue to permeate the lower and middle classes of society, causing an imminent racial tension. Since the 21st century, the number of young urban voters has been continuously declining, while the number of older, white, and rural voters has been increasing. After several rounds of crises, the profound differences that were previously concealed by economic growth have reappeared in people's view and become increasingly obvious.

4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of the far right as a potent political force in Europe is a symptomatic response to a continent in the throes of economic, cultural, and political upheaval. As demonstrated, the forces of globalization, while creating aggregate wealth, have simultaneously dismantled industrial sectors, intensified inequality, and undermined the social contract, leaving a vacuum of insecurity and economic despair. This void has been filled by the politics of identity, where the complex challenges of large-scale immigration and refugee crises are simplified into a powerful narrative of cultural threat, masterfully leveraged by far-right parties to stoke nationalism and xenophobia. Ultimately, the failure of the traditional centrist elite to adequately address these grievances—or even to acknowledge their validity—has resulted in a catastrophic erosion of trust. The elite's adherence to a paradigm that places neoliberal economics and liberal universalism above the immediate concerns of their national electorate has been interpreted as a betrayal, pushing voters toward parties that promise to reclaim national sovereignty and protect national identity. Therefore, the rise of the far right is not merely a political shift but a fundamental challenge to the post-war liberal consensus, signaling a deep and possibly enduring fracture within European societies that continues to dictate the continent's uncertain trajectory.

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